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Thatcher to give data on 'serious spy penetration'

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LONDON — Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher will report to Parliament in the next few days on the alleged penetration of a top-secret Western intelligence center by a Soviet spy, government officials said yesterday.

The officials said Thatcher would provide a written statement to Parliament on reports that British linguist Geoffrey Arthur Prime seriously compromised Western intelligence by feeding secrets to the Soviets from 1968 to 1977.

The reports, published Sunday in the New York Times, said the security leak at the Government Communications Headquarters in Cheltenham, Britain's main communications center, was the most damaging Soviet penetration of Western security since World War II.

Both British and U.S. officials declined to comment on the Times report.

The Times, quoting U.S. officials, said British intelligence had ascertained that Prime, who was charged in July with espionage, was responsible for one of the longest penetrations by the Kremlin of Western intelligence since World War II.

The report said Prime, 44, one of only several dozen Russian-language experts at the center, supplied Moscow with a stream of sensitive information indicating which Soviet codes had been broken and which Soviet broadcast frequencies were being monitored.

Thus, the Times said, the Soviets were able to change their codes and frequencies to protect their secrets and might have used the monitored channels to supply bogus information to the West.

Thatcher's decision to issue a statement came as the result of a request Sunday by Ted Leadbitter, a Labor Party member whose questions in Parliament led to the exposure in 1979 of Queen Elizabeth II's art historian, Anthony Blunt, as a Soviet spy.

Britain's terse announcement of Prime's arrest did not say for whom Prime allegedly had spied, but at the time the prosecutor said the charges were "of the gravest possible nature." (Only two weeks earlier he was accused of three sexual assaults, the Washington Post reported today.)

Details of Prime's arrest on espionage charges were not disclosed in Britain because of stringent restrictions imposed by the country's Official Secrets Act, under which he was arrested. And because he is awaiting trial under that act, Prime's name was not published in British newspaper articles describing the New York Times' report.

Hidden in the Cotswolds 109 miles northwest of London, the Government Communications Headquarters is the center of a worldwide network of spy bases, surveillance ships, planes, satellites and listening antennas, though the British government has never officially acknowledged its existence.

Every day, according to published reports, its 10,000 employees sift through millions of words of intercepted tape recordings and transcripts from telephone, telex, television and computer transmissions from foreign military installations, government ministries, corporations and individuals.

The daily harvest of information is sent not only to British intelligence services but also to the U.S. National Security Agency and to intelligence agencies in Australia and Canada.

Among the most important functions of the center is the monitoring of Soviet diplomatic and military communications, according to published reports.

The Cheltenham language specialists, of whom Prime reportedly was one, are believed to translate messages once codes are broken and to offer advice and assistance to code-breakers in other branches of the intelligence services.

Laxity is charged

In recent years, there have been repeated charges about lax security at Cheltenham.

Duncan Campbell, an intelligence expert who writes for the New Nation magazine, said earlier this year that staff members at the center "openly gossip about their work in local pubs."

In yesterday's editions of the Guardian, a daily newspaper, a retired employee, Alex Lawrie, was quoted as saying that security at Cheltenham was "just about good enough to fend off a well-meaning drunk."

Describing security lapses at the center, Lawrie was quoted by the Guardian as saying that internal security officers at Cheltenham ignored warnings from the staff and were more concerned with ritual than efficiency.

"I always had the impression that the Russians knew a great deal more about [Cheltenham] than I did," Lawrie, who said he worked for 22 years as a linguist at Cheltenham before retiring in December, was quoted as saying. "It's such a huge place. It's inconceivable that the information wouldn't get out. Infiltration seems to be par for the course."

In one incident, he said, a team of decorators, who did not have security clearances, were given the run of the center at night and rifled desks for cigarettes and books. Afterward, he said, security officials told the regular staff that the security men were not responsible for personal possessions.

"We couldn't seem to get it through to them that this was a dreadful breach of security," Lawrie was quoted as saying.

Problem since 1951

Britain's intelligence services have been plagued by allegations of treason and incompetence since the 1951 defections to Moscow of Guy Burgess, a British agent in Washington, and Donald MacLean, a high-level operative in London.

In 1963, Harold "Kim" Philby, then a British spy in Beirut, also fled to Moscow, apparently after being tipped that his cover was blown.

Later in 1963, Blunt, the queen's art historian, confessed that he had been recruited as a Soviet spy during his years at Cambridge University. The confession was not made public until 1979.

Ironically, the latest flap came as the government was celebrating the defection to the West of Vladimir Kuzichkin, described in press reports as a senior member of the KGB, the Soviet spy agency.